

I'm Tamie, 16 and on strike

Teen gets tossed among big, smelly men and asks you to show them some respect

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Tamie Dolny

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

I'm supposed to be working as a lifeguard and swimming instructor this summer at Etobicoke's Memorial Pool. Instead, as a member of CUPE Local 79, I'm on strike.

And on Canada Day, I picketed at the Ingram Transfer Station.

I've never really spent time with a group of men. Boys, certainly, but not honest-to-God men. And to tell you the truth, they're not that different – just bigger, fatter, smellier, hairier, taller and wider.

During a strike, they're also incredibly interesting.

How could Canada Day be boring when your mother drives you to a dump site in the middle of nowhere, smiles and waves at you, and then drives away, screeching her tires? Just 16, I was left to fend for myself in the testosterone jungle of picketing members of CUPE Locals 79 and 416.

Ingram Transfer Station, I learned, is code for a dump-and-run garbage zone where peeved-off unemployed workers stand around and burn stuff.

It was the most potentially dangerous situation I'd ever been in at seven in the morning. Tall, ferocious-looking unionized garbage workers and office staff stood around amid piles of rotting trash – chain-smoking, ranting and showing off their drooping arm tattoos.

Everybody – including the small number of women on my shift – seemed to curse every second word. There was nobody, aside from me, under the age of 25.

So I set myself down on a curb, rested my head in my hands, and glared at everyone in that I-am-a-spoiled-teenager-and-I-don't-want-to-be-here fashion.

Little did I know how much I would learn.

I'm not your typical city worker. As a teenager, I fervently practise three activities: staying up too late, talking back to my parents and giggling about boys. Going on strike was not part of my summer plans.

I started off not caring at all about the actual meaning of the dispute: I was there for the strike pay, not to support my fellow workers. If I worked for just four hours a day, five days a week, CUPE 79 would pay me \$200.

For a student like me, that seems like decent enough money.



RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

Tamie Dolny, outside her Old Mill home, is on strike with CUPE instead of working as a lifeguard. Her father works as a manager for the City of Toronto. (July 14, 2009)

I soon got a reality check.

I am currently scheduled at the York Civic Centre, where I picket in the back parking lot. On my first day, a woman brought along her 2-year-old toddler, for whom she couldn't find daycare. The second day, I overheard another woman talking about being behind on her phone bill.

We've been striking for nearly four weeks now: \$200 times four equals \$800, right?

In an expensive city like Toronto, \$800 barely manages to cover rent, if you're lucky. On top of that are food, clothes, utility bills, miscellaneous needs and desires.

Some people live from paycheque to paycheque. A strike could cost them their home and credit rating.

You might wonder, "Why are you on strike? And why should I care?"

Well, first, when your parents tell you to go on picket duty instead of sitting around watching TV, as a dependent child, you tend to do what you're told. It's particularly ironic because my father is a manager for the City of Toronto. Imagine our dinner conversations.

And why should you care? Because it's so incredibly, mind-bogglingly unfair.

The public isn't on our side. Most of the summer workers like me aren't even on our side. I know that, and all unionized workers know that. But stay with me.

Under their current contract, which expires next year, Toronto police get a pay raise of at least 3 per cent each year, and had to make no concessions. Toronto firefighters got an increase of 3 per cent annually with no concessions. TTC workers got 3 per cent with no concessions. Toronto Housing workers got 3 per cent with no concessions.

Even city councillors got a pay raise of 2.4 per cent while still arguing that the city cannot afford any more union pay raises.

When initially discussing our contract with David Miller, Local 79 president Ann Dembinski reported back to the union that the city was initially offering something along the lines of a 0 per cent raise in the first year and a 1 per cent raise in the second year. As workers, we could lose money that first year because of inflation. That's pretty vile.

Back at Ingram Transfer Station, I was soon forgotten in the maze of litter and trash bags, the hazy clouds of cigarette smoke and overwhelming stench of garbage. So I continued sitting, nearly getting my feet squished by cars playing loud music, the drivers eager to drop off their stinky secrets.

Lying low turned out to be a good idea, since by that point two fights had nearly broken out between garbage dumpers and strikers, due to the overpowering scent of maleness and that crazy, I-am-tougher-and-more-macho-than-you emotion in the air.

Even so, in most of the cases when verbal fights did break out, they were started by people impatient about waiting an extra 15 minutes to dump their trash because of the picket. (When I was at Ingram, nobody waited for more than half an hour to drop off three bags of garbage.)

When one guy hissed in the face of a striker, saying something along the lines of "white trash," the striker hurled insults back at him. But, if certain media had been present, the striker's behaviour would probably have been described as "unprovoked," right?

I can barely claim to understand the complexities of the labour dispute. However, I can say that it's mean and hurtful when a man parks his car and grinds his wheels against the pavement, releasing pungent fumes and causing the pregnant woman who was picketing with me to start coughing.

It's wounding and cruel when a woman teeters past us on five-inch heels, swearing at striking workers, calling us all "faggots" and "idiots."

I can say that it's insulting and degrading when a patron decides to drive through the crowd of strikers, nearly bowling us all over. I can especially say that it's so, so painfully wrong to be malicious, rude and spiteful to a

group of people who just want to make a point for 15 minutes of your day.

I'm just pleading for a bit of respect, really. You don't need to agree with what the unions are fighting for. All you need to do is grant us the basic dignity any human being deserves.

Don't get angry. You'll get to where you need to go ... just a couple of minutes later, that's all.